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AUTHOR Metcalf, Fay
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ABSTRACT

This document, from the lesson plan series, "Teaching with Historic Places," examines the Scandanavian (particularly Finnish) origins of the log cabins that early U.S. settlers occupied. Following an introductory section, the document sets out student objectives, teaching activities, readings, and illustrations. The teaching activity suggestions include details on "Setting the Stage"; "Locating the Site"; "Determining the Facts"; and "Putting It All Together." A section that encourages the use of visual evidence calls upon students to examine 10 photographs and two sketches, all of which the lesson plan includes. There also are three map exhibits. Readings include "The Log Cabin Tradition"; "Long Valley Finnish Structures"; and "Log Cabin Politics." (SG)

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Log Cabins in America:

The Finnish Experience

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Teaching with Historic Places

A program of the National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places and the National Trust for Historic Preservation

Log Cabins in America: The Finnish Experience

BY FAY METCALF

Log cabins are as American as Fourth of July fireworks, baseball, and the bald eagle. Think of a pioneer and chances are you think of a log cabin: could Daniel Boone or Davy Crockett have lived in any other kind of house? Can you imagine the 1840 election—"Tippecanoe and Tyler, Too!"—without remembering the log-cabin-and-cider campaign? Would we be so impressed with Abe Lincoln if he had learned his letters under a crystal chandelier in a brick, Georgian-style house? Is it conceivable that Laura Ingalls Wilder's little house on the prairie was anything but a snug log structure? Assuredly, log cabins are enmeshed in American history, folklore, and myth.

This lesson about the American tradition of living in log cabins is based on National Register of Historic Places nomination files, visitor's guides to several western national parks, and other sources. Materials for students include (1) readings which examine the origins of log structures and their adaptation to the American frontier by the 17th-century settlers—Swedish and Finnish—of New Sweden, (2) maps showing the location of Finnish speakers and people of Finnish ancestry, and (3) photographs and sketches of typical Finnish log structures. This lesson could be used in teaching a unit on the development of the early colonies, trans-Appalachian settlement, or late 19th- and early 20th-century immigration. Students will learn how the log structures were constructed and look at a 20th-century settlement built by Finnish homesteaders in Idaho.

Objectives for the Students

- To explain the distinctive features of log structures built by Finnish homesteaders in Idaho.
- To explain how Finns and Swedes influenced the techniques used for building log structures.
- To describe how the log cabin became so widely used among colonists and later pioneers.
- To investigate the students' own locality to find out whether early European American settlers there built log cabins for shelter or, if not, the kind of easily built structures they did use.

Teaching Activities

Setting the Stage

Explain to the students that the log cabin has long been a symbol of American self-sufficiency. The cabin could be quickly built, and it provided a reasonably secure haven in a strange and often hostile environment. Neither arrows nor bullets could penetrate its thick wood walls which—if well built and carefully chinked—would keep out rain, snow, and cold. Although the cabins could be set aflame by fire brands during an Indian attack (one great fear shared by early pioneers and later settlers was being trapped within their houses during such an attack), this did not happen very often. As people continued to move westward in search of more and better land, they would abandon their cabins knowing they could easily build new ones as long as timber was available. Even in the early 20th century as far western lands opened up to settlement, new immigrants continued to construct log cabins as their first American homes.

Briefly outline the Homestead Act of May 20, 1862, under whose terms those citizens who were the head of a family or at least 21 years of age were offered 160 acres of surveyed land after five years of continuous residence and payment of a registration fee ranging from $26 to $34. Alternatively, land could be acquired at $1.25 an acre after six months' residence. By means of this act, Finnish immigrants settled in Idaho between 1900 and 1930.

Locating the Site

The majority of Finnish immigrants to America from 1860 to 1900 settled in the northern portions of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota where they worked as

miners, loggers, or dockhands on the Great Lakes (although smaller settlements grew up in such other states as New York, Maine, Oregon, Montana, and Idaho). Have the students locate Finland on a world map and then locate the states mentioned above. Have the students note the latitudes of the locations and ask them to try to explain why Finnish immigrants to America did not choose to settle in the South. The Finns of Idaho settled on homestead farmlands and in small towns. Ask the students to examine a map of Idaho and locate Coeur d'Alene, the Clark Fork River, and the towns of McCall and South Fork. Have them note the elevation and the proximity of national forest lands. What ways of life might the Finns have continued if they lived in a place like Idaho?

Provide the students with copies of the attached maps and have them complete the following exercise:

Compare Map Exhibits 1 and 2. Note the location of most Finnish speakers in 1920 and the number of people of Finnish ancestry in 1980. Compare the numbers of Finns in Idaho with those in other parts of the nation. Where are Finnish Americans located now? What has remained the same?

Determining the Facts

The Log Cabin Tradition

Have the students read Student Reading 1, "The Log Cabin Tradition," and answer the following questions:

a. Why is the origin of the log cabin unclear?

b. In what ways were the Finns especially good at building log cabins?

c. How did the Finns and the Swedes influence other European immigrants to America? Why was their influence important?

d. How did early log cabin dwellers get air and light into their homes?

e. What is the process of building a log cabin?

f. What influences made the log cabin popular in the 20th century?

Finnish Structures

Reading 2, "Long Valley Finnish Structures," is taken from a National Register of Historic Places nomination form for a thematic group of structures. Explain to the students that *thematic group* means that several related properties are being discussed and nominated as historic places. Have the students complete the reading and answer the following questions:

a. When did the Finns move into Long Valley?

b. What kinds of structures did they build on their homestead land?

c. How many homestead patents did the U.S. government issue to the Finns in the period 1904–25?

d. What construction techniques made Finnish cabins or houses nearly airtight?

e. Why were hewn logs preferred to round logs?

f. It is said of Finnish farms that they are usually smaller but have more buildings than the farms of other ethnic groups. How does the reading show this to be true?

g. Why is it important that Finnish homestead buildings be listed in the National Register of Historic Places? Is a goat barn really that significant? Defend your answer.

Visual Evidence

Provide the students with copies of photos 1–10 and sketches 1 and 2. First, have the students examine Photo 1 and Sketch 1. Ask them to try to determine the type of notching displayed in the photo. Explain that this particular type is known as the locking dovetail notch and that it is the only example found in the Long Valley group, although there are examples in some Finnish settlements in Minnesota. Next, have the students examine the other photographs, which display additional notching techniques. See if they can identify any of these. Photo 2 shows a hewn-log partition that has been notched into the exterior wall and then cut flush with the outside timbers. It provides a good example of the Finnish techniques of fitting logs together horizontally and of extending inside partitions through outside walls to provide strength to the entire structure.

Although the logs with which cabins and houses were built are very strong, the walls are not very stable unless the short or end walls are spaced fairly closely. Doors and windows cut into the logs also will weaken the structure. Still, many settlers extended their living space by adding a second "pen," or room, supported by strong interior walls embedded in the exterior walls as shown in Photo 2. Other methods of enlarging a house are shown on Sketch 2. These larger structures are technically called log houses rather than log cabins. Have the students refer to Sketch 2 as they study photos 3–10. Then have the class discuss the evidence that shows how the Finns managed to build their large structures.

Putting It All Together

Clearly, log cabins have a special place in American culture. The sight of one can call forth from our memo-

ries any number of associations from the movies or books about life on the frontier. However, many students, especially those living in large cities, may never have seen a log cabin—neither a historic structure, nor a modern version. Still, they will have some sense of the cabin as a symbol representing myth. Reading 3, "Log Cabin Politics," does not deal directly with the main lesson presented here but can add to textbook coverage of the log cabin campaign and the image log cabins hold in the American mind.

Activity 1: Folk Housing

The homes of ordinary people of the pre-railroad era are called folk housing. They were built of available materials, such as wood, earth, and stone, and differ markedly by region of the country and cultural traditions of the first groups of settlers. Have students examine Map Exhibit 3, "Pre-Railroad Folk Housing Traditions," to determine the most common type of folk housing found in their region. Find out if there are examples of these houses that the class might visit. If the houses are log buildings, have the students examine them closely to see if they find any Finnish influences. If the folk housing is of another type, ask students to compare the structures to log cabins. What are the similarities and the differences? How much space do the buildings have compared with a typical one-pen log cabin? How might those houses have been enlarged? (The state historic preservation office can usually direct you to appropriate sites.)

Activity 2: Role Play

The students pretend that they are early settlers in the community in which they reside. They are to make their living by farming. They draw a sketch of their first home and of the outbuildings they will need for the farm work. Although they may base the sketch on what they know of log-built structures, encourage them to take into account their own ethnic heritage and the predominant pre-railroad building type of the area. The point is to acknowledge not only the important role the Finns played in establishing the log cabin as a practical and popular form of housing, but also the vital role that folk housing of all ethnic groups played in establishing American values and continuing ways of life.

Activity 3: Modern Log Housing

Some students might enjoy rereading Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* to examine the techniques used by the Ingalls family to build their log house and then to compare that construction with what is used locally today. A good source for finding log-home builders in most states is the *Annual Buyer's Guide, Log Home Living*, found in most public libraries or on newsstands. In that publication, students will learn that companies in 49 of the 50 states, including Hawaii, can provide kits for owner-built log houses or can build a log house on site. The log cabin retains its appeal.

Activity 4: The Use of Symbols

Have students complete Reading 3, "Log Cabin Politics" and discuss the following:

- How do various commonplace items come to represent larger ideas?
- What other objects (or people or animals) besides log cabins have been used for political symbols? These might include national symbols (such as the Democratic donkey, Republican elephant, or Uncle Sam) or those adopted by specific candidates, campaigns, or causes (such as a bear for Theodore Roosevelt, an ax for Carrie Nation's temperance crusade, or a broom as used recently with success by a mayoral candidate to represent a "clean sweep" of corruption).
- What qualities, character traits, or ideas are these symbols intended to represent? Do these symbols help or hinder understanding of the issues involved?

This is one in a series of lesson plans by the National Register of Historic Places and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The National Register is maintained by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, as a means of recognizing properties significant in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture. Each registration file contains a description of the property, an explanation of its historical importance, one or more photographs, one or more maps, and sometimes other documentation. The computerized National Register Information System (NRIS) can produce listings according to location, historical function, historical theme, and other categories. To obtain copies of registration documents or NRIS information, contact Teaching with Historic Places, National Register of Historic Places, Interagency Resources Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, D.C. 20013-7127, or phone (202) 343-9536. The National Trust and its 250,000 members support preservation organizations and programs in neighborhoods and communities throughout the United States where staff and volunteers are available to work with their schools. For more information on the National Trust's educational programs, please write Heritage Education, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1785 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington. D.C. 20036, or phone (202) 673-4040.

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- What is the origin of these symbols? (The students might each research the origin of one of the symbols discussed.)
- Are all symbols positive?

Visiting the Sites

The Finnish log structures discussed in this lesson are located off Highway 55 (some on unimproved, some on unnamed, roads) in the vicinity of Donnelly, Idaho. They are privately owned and not open to the public. However, the nearby Southern Idaho Timber Association buildings are also good examples of Finnish log construction. The buildings are located at the corner of Lake and State streets in the town of McCall and on Highway 55 in Smith's Ferry.

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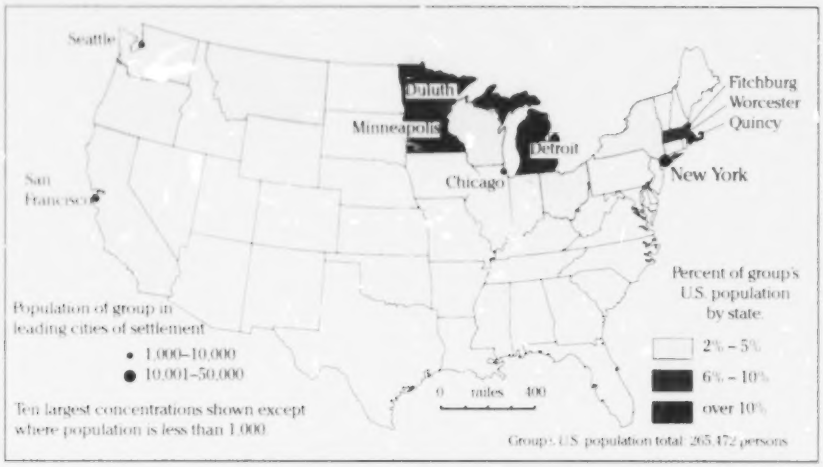
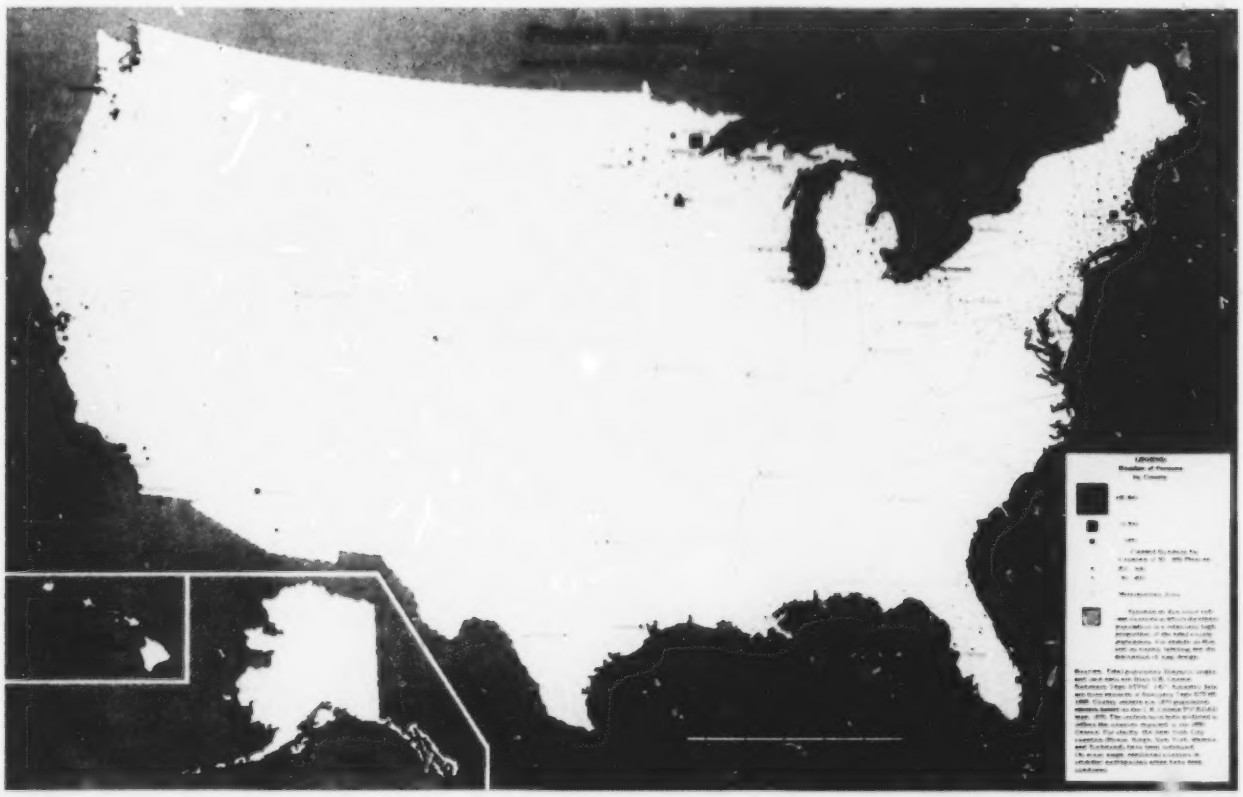
Map Exhibit 1



Finnish Mother Tongue Population, 1920

Map Exhibit 2



Finnish Ancestry
Number of Persons by County — 1980

Map Exhibits 1 and 2 were adapted from James P. Allen and Eugene J. Turner, *We the People: An Atlas of America's Ethnic Diversity* (New York: Macmillan, 1988).

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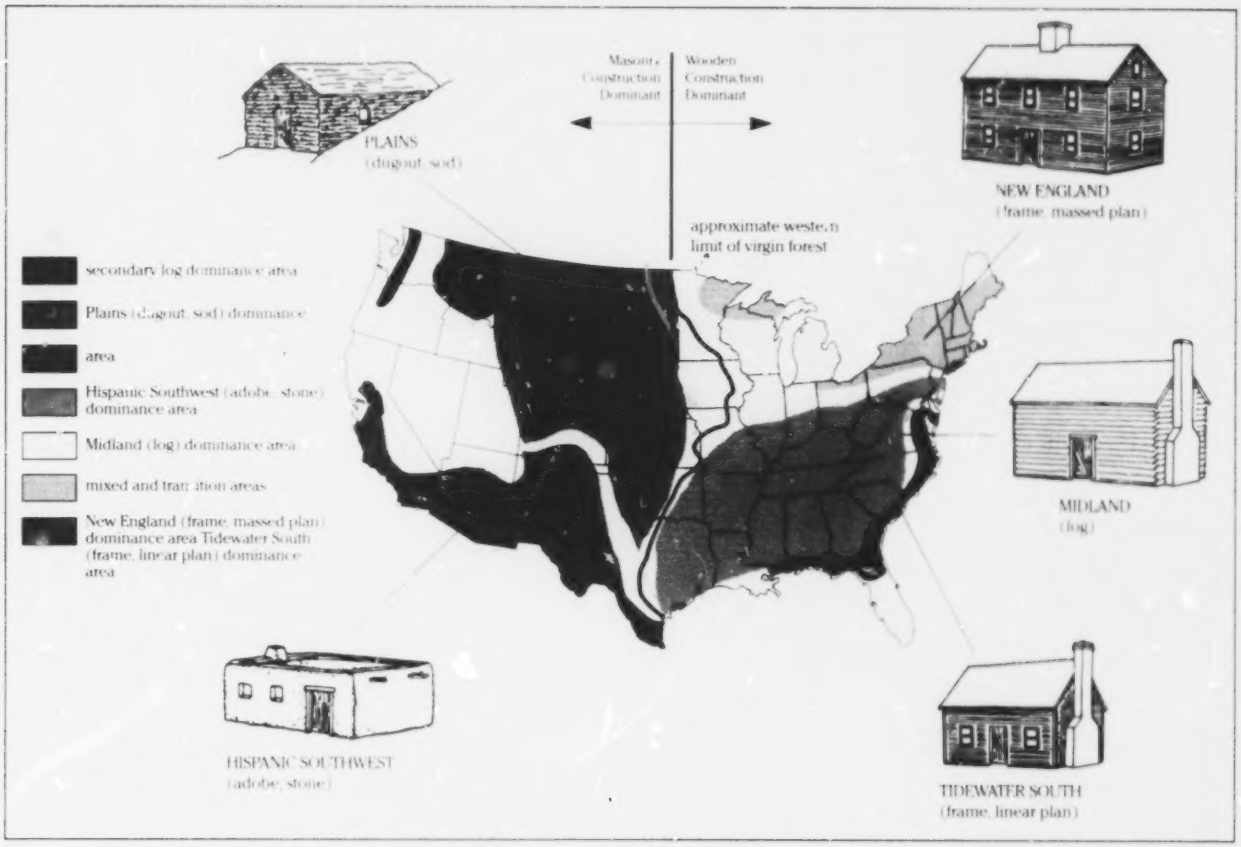
Map Exhibit 3



Pre-Railroad Folk Housing Traditions, c. 1850–90

This map was adapted from Virginia and Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984).

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Reading 1: The Log Cabin Tradition

The origin of the log structure is uncertain. It is probable that it began in northern Europe sometime in the Bronze Age (c. 3,500 B.C.). By the time Europeans began to settle in America, there was a long tradition of using logs for houses, barns and other outbuildings in the Scandinavian countries, Germany, and Northern Russia. These regions had vast stands of softwood timber that could easily be worked with simple hand tools. According to C. A. Weslager, whose book on log cabins is considered a classic, the Finns, as well as the Swedes, had a "close attunement" with the forests, and both groups had well-developed forest industries. Weslager goes on to say:

> The Finns were accomplished in building several forms of log housing, having different methods of corner timbering, and they utilized both round and hewn logs. Their log building had undergone an evolutionary process from the crude "pirtii"... a small gabled-roof cabin of round logs with an opening in the roof to vent smoke, to more sophisticated squared logs with interlocking double-notch joints, the timber extending beyond the corners. Log saunas or bathhouses of this type are still found in rural Finland.

When the Finns and the Swedes began to arrive in New Sweden, they brought their knowledge of such wood construction with them. So did later immigrants from Germany. The Scots, Irish, and Scots-Irish had no tradition of building with logs, but they quickly adopted the technique. The log cabin suited early settlers and later pioneers. It would have been nearly impossible to carry building materials across the ocean in the small sailing ships of the time. It would have been equally difficult to transport building materials on horseback or even in the wagons or river barges pioneers used to cross mountains and valleys in their search for their own land. So, wherever there were forested areas, the log cabin became the preferred type of initial dwelling. Log cabins did not even need nails or spikes to hold them together. Until the 19th century nails were made by hand by blacksmiths, which meant they were quite expensive, and like lumber, they were also heavy.

Log cabins were relatively easy to build. Weslager reports that a record was set by three men who cut down trees, trimmed them, dragged the logs to the building site, notched the logs, and built a one-room cabin with chimney and fireplace in two days. For most people it took a bit longer, but it was possible for a man working alone to build a cabin in one to two weeks. However, a man alone faced some problems. Because it is physically difficult to lift a heavy log above one's head, most men could build cabins only six to eight logs high. With help, it was possible to build several logs higher—even two-story log houses were possible. First, skids of two logs were placed against the wall at an angle to serve as an inclined plane. Then forked sticks or ropes were used to position the logs.

Most log cabins had a single room, or "pen," some 12 to 16 feet square. There was one door, and usually no windows. If windows were cut into the walls, animal skins or boards fixed to slide across the openings were used. Some builders used paper greased with animal fat, which made it both translucent and waterproof. Most log cabin builders placed the fireplace at one end of the cabin and built the chimney of wattle. Stone or clay was used for the hearth and the interior of the fireplace. As these were not very safe constructions, later builders used brick or stone if they could be obtained. Fireplaces provided warmth, light, and fuel for cooking. Back bars and cranes made of forged iron were used to hold cooking pots. Not until the 1840s were cast-iron ranges available that would burn wood or coal, so cooking over a fireplace did not seem a hardship.

This student reading was compiled from C. A. Weslager, *The Log Cabin in America: From Pioneer Days to the Present* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1969); Virginia and Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984); visitor's guides to several western national parks; and other sources on the history of the western frontier.

Inside walls were often chinked with clay or cloth. Most floors were simply beaten earth, although some cabins had floors of puncheons—logs split lengthwise and laid close together with the flat sides up. A family often built a sleeping loft if the roof were high enough. The loft could be reached by pegs pounded into the walls or by a ladder built from tree limbs. The loft also was used to store foodstuffs.

Log cabins were never meant to be permanent, but many log houses were. The difference between the two was primarily one of size and attention to detail. Most pioneers preferred "flat" walls to rounded log walls, and so most used hewn logs for building. These not only made the houses look (from a distance) more "real," but also withstood the elements much better, since the bark and the decay-prone outside wood were removed from the logs. When milled lumber became available either from a local sawmill or by railroad transport, most people chose it for their homes.

It seemed that as the frontier disappeared, so would the log cabin. However, at about the same time the Finnish homesteaders were, of necessity, building their first homes of logs, Easterners were rediscovering the log structure. William A. Durant, land developer and president of the Adirondack Railroad, pushed the idea of Great Camps in the Adirondacks. These camps were enclaves where the very wealthy could escape the summer heat of the cities and retreat to the "simple life" of log-cabin living in the country. Such "cabins" were hardly simple. Designed by architects, they were huge structures with many rooms and fireplaces and porches. But their log exteriors recalled the "good old-days". National park structures also fueled the revival of log cabin living. Many park lodges were made of logs so they would fit their surroundings. The Old Faithful Inn at Yellowstone National Park is a prime example. Built in 1904, the inn has an eight-story lobby some 185 feet high. There are 140 guest rooms and three sets of balconies.

Another factor that kept the tradition of log building alive was the Great Depression of the 1930s. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) worked with the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service to build thousands of log structures throughout the national forests and parks. Had it not been for these the log cabin might have disappeared, but because people saw the log structures and liked what they saw, many began to build modern log cabins and log houses. These homes seemed to represent all that a family could want: a sturdy shelter from the elements and a simple, self-sufficient lifestyle. The log cabin remains a popular building style.

Reading 2: Long Valley Finnish Structures

Description

The buildings nominated in this thematic group were constructed by members of the Finnish settlement in the area of Long Valley, Idaho, between 1900 and 1930. They include log homestead cabins, houses, and saunas; log and frame barns; and the frame Elo school and Elo schoolteacher's cottage. The log structures in particular share several similarities in style, materials, and technique. Finnish building craft resulted in tightly fitting logs using corner notches of the double, full-dovetail, or locking dovetail styles. Most of the buildings being nominated here are of hewn logs, although a few are constructed of round logs.

The buildings date back to 1902. They are the last physical remnants of the Finnish homesteads that dotted the valley as more and more immigrants settled here. The index to United States patents for Valley County lists 94 homestead patents issued to Finns between the years 1904 and 1925; few of these homesteads are intact and only a small number of their buildings still stand. Those that do, however, are both historically and architecturally significant and some of them deserve listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The Finns built extraordinarily sturdy structures by using a tool they called a *vara*, or scribe, to measure how much wood should be grooved out of the bottom of a log so that it would fit snugly on the curved upper side of the one beneath it. Chinking was rarely necessary in a Finnish-built log cabin, although sometimes moss or rags were placed between logs for insulation. This method dates back at least to the 13th century and is so effective that it was still used on nearly all the Finnish homestead buildings in Long Valley. Most of the buildings were made of hewn logs, perhaps because, as Donovan Clemson writes in his book *Living with Logs*, "hewed logs looked a little more professional, removed the building a little from the rawness associated with the standing bush . . . the house, hopefully, might even be mistaken from a distance for a frame building with dressed sides."

This nomination includes six homestead cabins; seven log houses of two or more rooms; four log saunas; log barn and frame barn of double crib style; log granary, goat barn, chicken house, and blacksmith's shop; frame school building and a frame teacher's cottage—25 structures representing several farm activities and typical homesteads from a one-room cabin to a hewn-log house consisting of two or more rooms and one or two stories. Very few written records of the Finnish community in Long Valley still exist, but these buildings suggest how the Finns lived and worked in the homestead era of Valley County.

Significance

The surviving log homestead cabins, saunas, and barns of the Finns in Long Valley are examples of the Finns' extraordinary skill in constructing sturdy and weather-resistant log buildings. A number of these buildings are in remarkably good condition, considering that their exposure to the region's harsh winters spans, in some cases, more than 70 years. These buildings are reminders of a community's past, the homestead era in Idaho, and a national heritage that reaches back to 1638, when the first Finns came to this country and the first log cabins were constructed in America. Many of the features of the 17th-century cabins in the New Sweden area can be seen in Finnish-built homestead structures in Long Valley.

Long Valley is fast becoming a popular resort area; the farmland is being sold and subdivided, and homestead buildings—regarded as old shacks—are often destroyed or allowed to deteriorate. National Register listing will provide a record of these structures for future generations and will undoubtedly spark interest in preserving some of the buildings in the thematic group. The structures have a significance both historical and architectural. The Finnish community had become almost completely assimilated into the larger mainstream culture of Long Valley by 1980, and a record of their settlement should not be lost.

1. Donovan Clemson, *Living with Logs* (Saanichton, B.C.: Hancock House, 1974), pp. 32–33.

This student reading was compiled from National Register Nomination Form "Long Valley Finnish Structures (Thematic Group)" (Valley County, Idaho), by Alice Koskella, Architectural Historian, Idaho State Historical Society, 1982.

Reading 3: Log Cabin Politics

For a time, being born in a log cabin was almost essential for presidential candidates. It all began with the campaign of 1839, which pitted the incumbent Democrat, Martin Van Buren, against the Whig candidate, retired General William Henry Harrison. It was one of those campaigns in which the incumbent could do no right. The Panic of 1837 had caused widespread unemployment; banks had closed their doors or had refused to pay out gold and silver. Van Buren believed it was unconstitutional for the government to intervene.

Nearly any half-way respectable Whig could have been elected and General Harrison was. Harrison had appeal as a folksy midwesterner who had 30 years before led a troop of 1,000 soldiers against an uprising of Indians near the Tippecanoe River in Indiana Territory. His running mate was John Tyler, former governor of Virginia.

There were many who opposed Harrison, finding him too old at 67 and less than a great thinker. Newspaperman John de Ziska ridiculed Harrison in an article in a Baltimore newspaper, writing, "Give him a barrel of hard cider, and settle a pension on him and . . . he will sit the remainder of his days in his log cabin by the side of the fire and study moral philosophy!"

Harrison had lived in a log cabin—of sorts. When he was first married he bought a farm along the Ohio River that had a four-room frame house built around a log cabin. Harrison and his wife lived in the house a short time before he began his long career as army officer, congressman, senator, governor of Indiana, and minister to Colombia. Upon retirement, Harrison returned to the farm and enlarged the house by adding 12 rooms and completely refurbishing the original structure with clapboard to match the additional two wings. As for drinking hard cider, Harrison, like most Ohioans, probably did enjoy cider made from apples in his own orchard.

Intended as a slur, Ziska's article simply enhanced Harrison's reputation. Astute Whigs reshaped the unkind words into a winning campaign song and slogan.

> They say he lived in a log cabin
> And lived on hard cider, too.
> Well, what if he did, I'm certain
> He's the hero of Tippecanoe.

People liked "Tippecanoe and Tyler, Too!" and they connected log-cabin life with virtue. Most westerners of the time had been born in a log cabin or were still living in one. Even people in the eastern cities had ancestors who lived in log cabins. These people believed that the log cabin stood for something. It represented self-sufficient, hard-working pioneer families who could overcome adversity and improve their lot and that of their children. So deeply did the log cabin as symbol of virtue become embedded in the national folklore that, for the next half century, it was believed that youth spent in a log cabin produced clear-headed, independent thinkers who were beholden to no one. "Honest Abe" Lincoln is a prime example.

Photo 1. Detail of northeast corner, Jacob and Herman Mahala Homestead, Long Valley, Idaho. (Alice Koskella, 1980)

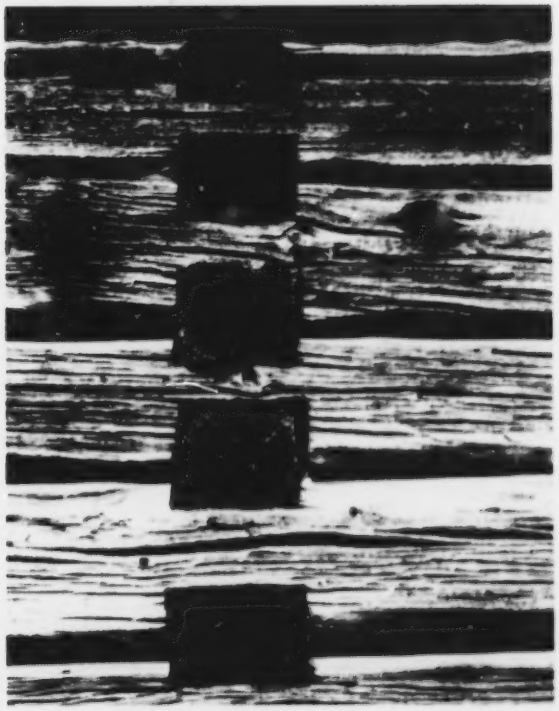

Photo 2. Exterior wall detail, Gust Laituri Homestead, Long Valley, Idaho. (Alice Koskella, 1980)

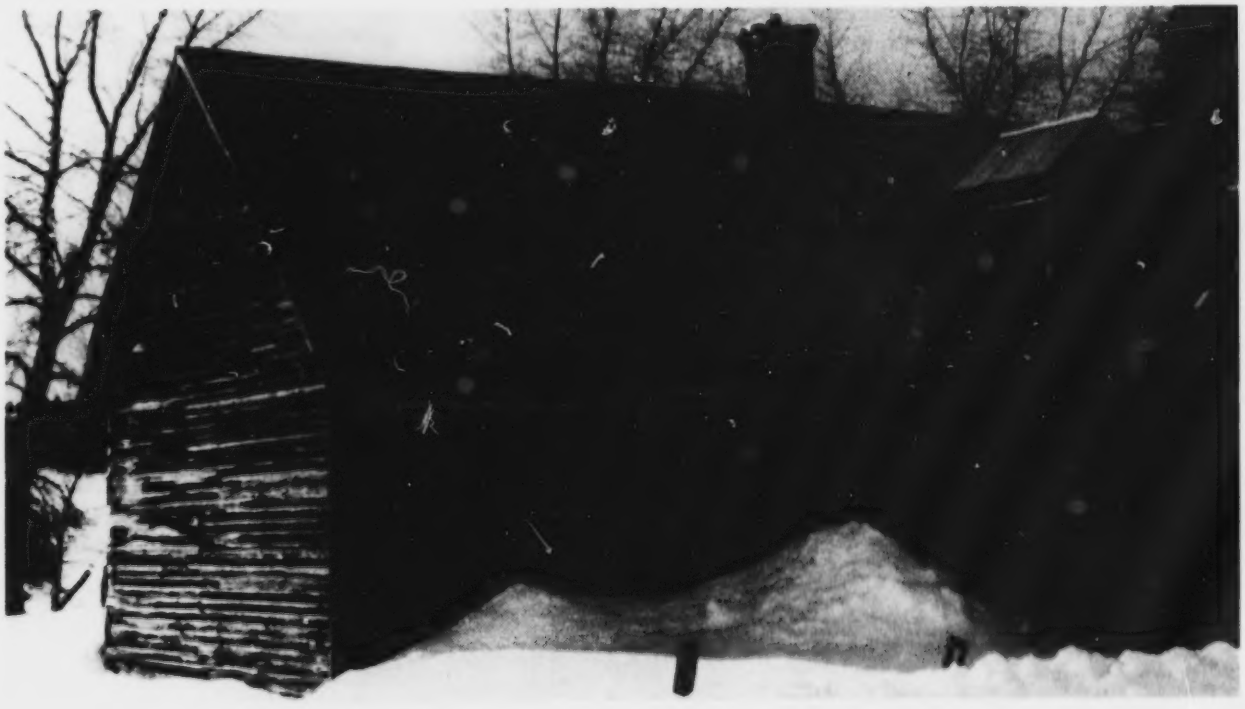

Photo 3. Elo School, Long Valley, Idaho. (Alice Koskella, 1979)

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Photo 4. Teacher's Cottage for Elo School, Long Valley, Idaho. (photographer and date unknown)

Photo 5. Chicken House, Nickolai Wargelin Homestead, Long Valley, Idaho. (Alice Koskella, 1980)

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Photo 6. Goat Barn, John G. Johnson (Rintakangas) Homestead, Long Valley, Idaho. (Alice Koskella, 1980)

Photo 7. Granary, Jacob Maki Homestead, Long Valley, Idaho. (Alice Koskella, 1980)

Photo 8. Log Barn, Nickolai Wargelin Homestead, Long Valley, Idaho. (Alice Koskella, 1980)

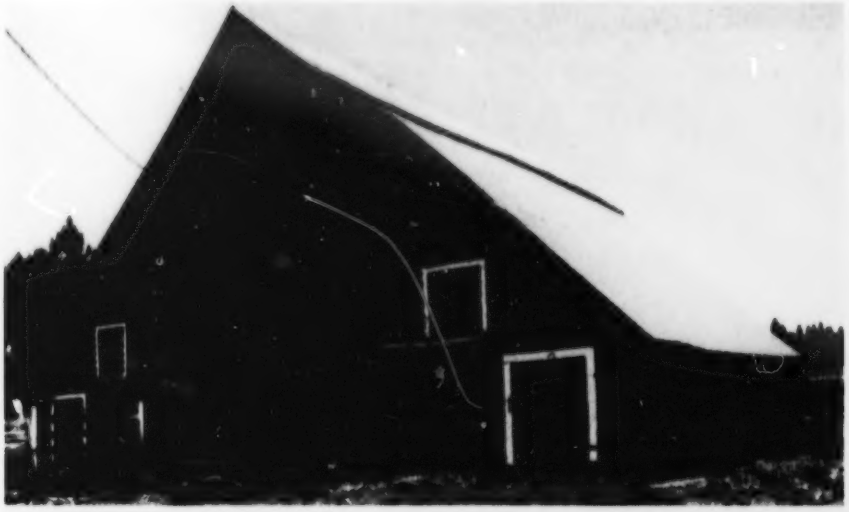

Photo 9. Blacksmith's Shop, Jacob and Herman Mahala Homestead, Long Valley, Idaho. (Alice Koskella, 1980)

Photo 10. Sauna, John G. Johnson (Rintakangas) Homestead, Long Valley, Idaho. (Alice Koskella, 1979)

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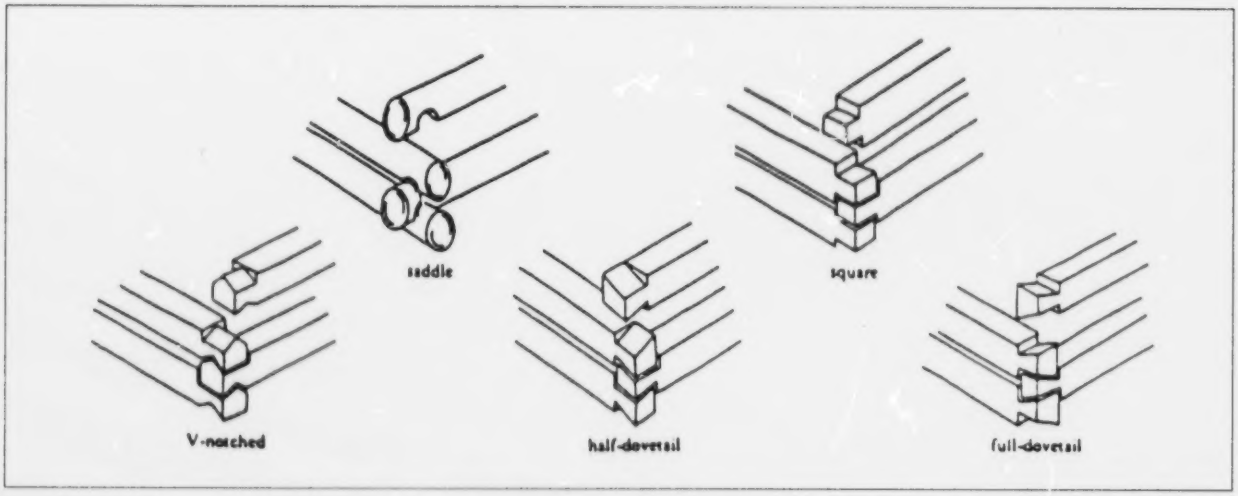
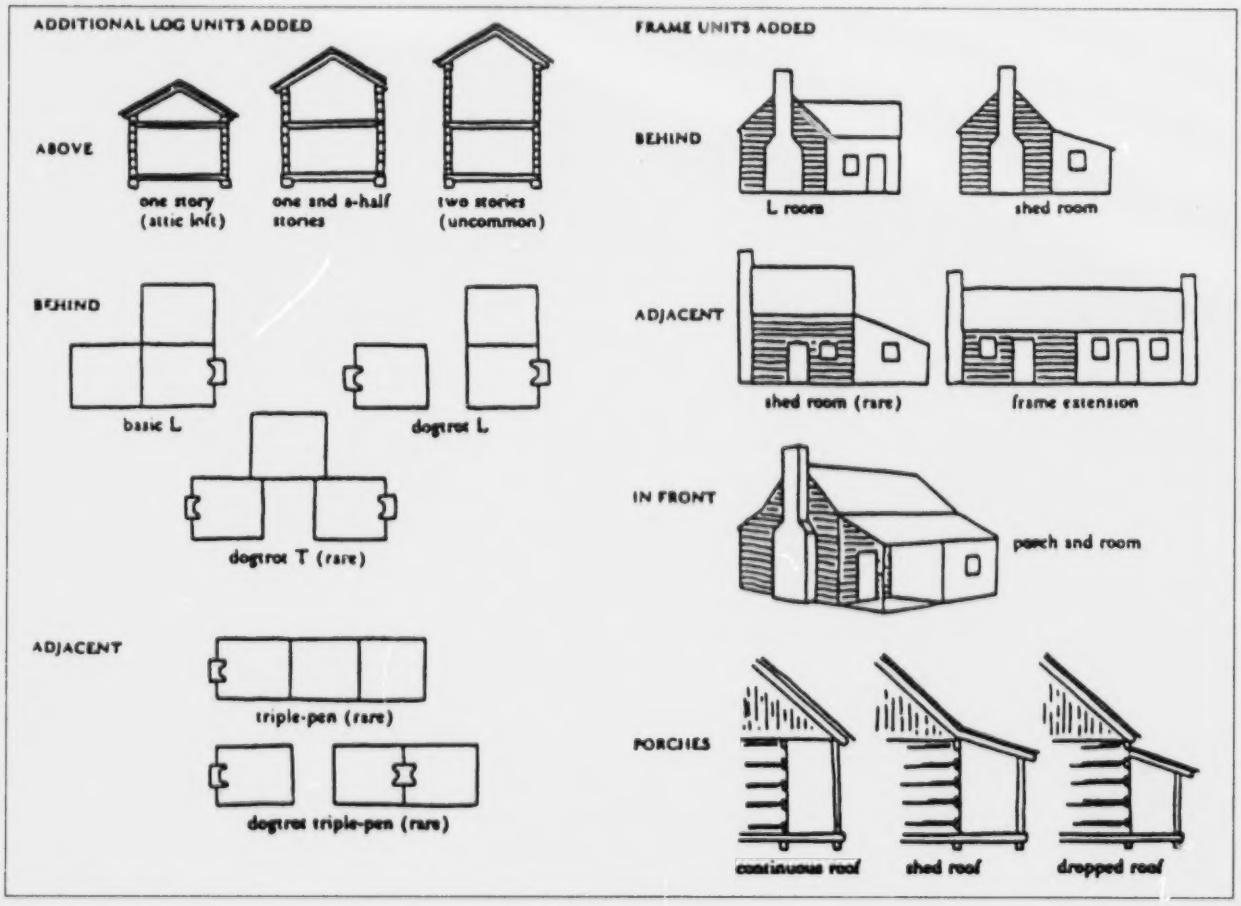


Sketch 1 Log Corner Notching Systems



Sketch 2 Enlarging the Log House

These sketches were adapted from Virginia and Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984).